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Priorat pioneers celebrate 25 years

TASTING ARTICLES PRIORAT



Those most closely involved in the extraordinary story of the revival of Priorat met in Barcelona last week to celebrate their 25th anniversary. (You can catch up with the story of how Priorat began to change from an almost abandoned corner of Catalunya to a prosperous and well-regarded wine region in [Priorat - worth the money](#) and in the [Priorat entry](#) in your online *Oxford Companion*).

Five visionaries led by René Barbier (Clos Mogador) started almost from zero, sharing the same facility to produce what can be regarded as the first great contemporary Priorat wine in 1989. They were José Luis Perez (Clos Martinet), [Daphne Glorian](#) (Clos Erasmus), [Álvaro Palacios](#) (Finca Dofí, L'Ermita) and Carles Pastrana (Clos de l'Obac). Today they are all considered stellar producers worldwide.

A commemorative lunch was organised at the outstanding Caelis restaurant in Barcelona. Sadly, just four of the five were present as Carles Pastrana declined to join the festivities. But the four remaining pioneers showed a fascinating miscellaneous tasting of their wines from different vintages and explained the evolution of their wines and the region. [Ferran's photo shows, left to right, Barbier, Perez, Glorian and

Palacios.]

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cannot hide my admiration for the achievements of Priorat, and of all these producers. I felt really proud each time I opened a bottle from any top Priorat producer during my time as sommelier at elBulli. And although personally, as a wine consumer, I have my reservations about the stylistic path some Priorats have taken, the potential, the quality, and the wines' ability to express their location is undeniable.

Throughout lunch some really interesting topics were discussed. Emotional memories flooded in. Barbier recalled, 'when we started in 1989, Spain was flooded with very good wines, but most of them were produced by big companies, with great oenological skills but they paid much less attention to viticulture.' He remembered how, 'at that time everybody said that we were not going to be able to sell a bottle of Priorat above 150 pesetas (€1). It was not until I went to Paris and met the great sommelier Jean-Claude Jambon [world's best sommelier in 1986] that I heard that our wine was really worth the 1,500 pesetas (€9) we needed in order to prosper'.

José Luis Pérez of Clos Martinet added, 'When René suggested to me to get involved in the project I had no idea how to produce a great wine. Thanks to them I started to be moved by wine and discovered that fine wine is a combination of science, techniques and art.' On top of that Álvaro Palacios, who with L'Ermita went on to produce one of Spain's most expensive wines, pointed out, 'since the beginning, our project in Priorat has been a combination of passion, mystics and beauty. When we landed here, the youngest vines were 40 years old, nobody planted vines and conversations in the street were all about hazelnuts not vines.'

During the 25 years, one of the most discussed philosophical issues about Priorat has been the use of international grape varieties to complement the local Garnatxa and Carinyena (Grenache and Carignan in French). Pérez explained, ‘At that time Garnatxa and Carinyena were considered oxidative and the Catalan Agriculture Department recommended that we should plant the so-called improving grapes, Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah. We of course fell prey to that.’ Glorian of Clos Erasmus added, ‘Garnatxa had a very bad reputation because in France some over-productive clones were used’.

Today the local grapes have won the day. Palacios has changed to almost 100% Garnatxa for Finca Dofí and L’Ermita. Barbier is succeeding with its Carinyena-based wine Manyetes and Clos Martinet is gaining recognition with its top cuvée Camí de Pesseroles based solely on Garnatxa and Carinyena. Although Glorian’s Clos Erasmus still has an important percentage of Syrah, she abandoned Cabernet Sauvignon in 2003. Palacios was very clear: ‘Priorat has such potential that we should be able to forgive any errors of youth’.

Another hot topic was the capacity to age. I have a love-hate relationship with aged Priorat. My experience includes both great bottles with some showing obvious premature evolution. I am still not fully persuaded about the idea of ageing Priorat. However, if you take a look at my notes on Clos Martinet 1991 and Finca Dofí 1994 below you will see that they showed perfectly. Palacios made the interesting point that ‘some wines from the early 2000s have hit a bump on the road after few years in bottle, but they are now experiencing a revival’.

Of course, international press recognition was also mentioned. Priorat was really coddled by the American wine press in the first decade of this century. In fact they all agreed on the key role the media have had in supporting the revolution of the area. ‘Jancis Robinson was the first international author to publish [the region’s wine map](#), which was extremely helpful in increasing awareness of Priorat’, said Barbier.

Just as an example, if you take a quick look at our tasting notes database, you will see that Clos Martinet is rarely rated below 17, whereas Mogador consistently achieves 17.5, Erasmus 18, and Finca Dofí has reached a paramount 19 for the 2004.

Priorat has also experienced what might be regarded a silent revolution with the emergence of second or third labels at lower prices. In the €10 to €30 segment Priorat demonstrates very consistent quality and great value. Clos Martinet and Álvaro Palacios have been structuring their offering with different qualities since the beginning, while Erasmus’s second label Laurel was launched in 2003. Clos Mogador is the only original Priorat wine that has not bet on second labels. Barbier pointed out, ‘the second and third labels have helped to increase considerably the market size,

and they have been extremely important to build a sustainable region. However, as Clos Mogador was born with the idea of single estate I did not want to produce a second label'. Palacios said, 'I was selling my young-vines wine in bulk. After the 2007 financial crisis the vines reached 18 years and I decided it was time to produce Camins del Priorat. Wines in this cheaper segment have helped many Priorat producers to withstand the crisis'. Camins del Priorat is a remarkable third label that consistently achieves scores of 16.5 on this site [or even more, as [here](#) - JR].

Below you will find my notes on the wines presented, in alphabetical order by producer. But before presenting them I would like to finish with Glorian's words: '25 years, they have flown by! I hope we can continue this way for 25 more'. Dare I say, my compliments and I really hope you keep amazing wine lovers with your prodigious wines.